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COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Fifty-eighth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 1447th MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,
on Monday, 12 March 2001, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. SHERIFIS

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS, COMMENTS AND INFORMATION SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 9 OF THE CONVENTION (agenda item 6) (continued)

Ninth periodic report of Portugal (CERD/C/357/Add. 1; HRI/CORE/1/Add.20)

1. At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Leitão, Mr. Marrecas Ferreira, Ms. Fernandes, Ms. Dias Nobre and Ms. Cardoso Ferreira and Mr. Pereira Gomes (Portugal) took places at the Committee table.

2. Mr. LEITÃO (Portugal) said that, in recent years, more and more foreigners and immigrants from an increasing number of countries had become legal citizens. Portugal was in the process of implementing new legislation on the entry, residence, departure and removal of foreigners, which would make it possible for foreigners illegally working in Portugal to regularize their situation. In is new policies to help in integrating immigrants and combating all forms of racial discrimination, his Government had borne in mind the Committee's recommendations as well as the potential which the Convention held for building a non-racist society.

3. The Convention was directly applicable in domestic law. The Penal Code made provision for the crime of racial discrimination. The fight against all forms of racial discrimination had been stepped up, Act No. 134/99 of 28 August 1999 having made provision for administrative sanctions for a whole series of punishable acts. During the Portuguese presidency of the European Union, his Government had undertaken to approve directives and a programme of action under the new anti-discrimination clause - article 13 - of the Treaty of Amsterdam, and a new equal treatment directive had been adopted.

4. As High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (HCIEM), he ensured that his office was actively involved in the fight against racial discrimination at national and European level. In April 2000, the Office of the High Commissioner had sponsored round-table discussions with the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia. Further round-table meetings on the same subject would be held in April 2001.

5. His Government continued to work to create conditions that would enable immigrants and Portuguese citizens to take an active part in decision-making on policies of concern to them and in their implementation. He referred in that context to the Consultative Council for Immigration Questions, in which associations of immigrants were represented and which had competence for advising on all bills concerning the rights of immigrants and participated in defining integration policies to eliminate discrimination and promote equality.

6. Act No. 115/99 had institutionalized associations of immigrants and their descendants, who now had the right to be involved in determining immigration policy and legislation concerning immigrants, were given air time on public radio and television, were exempt from a number of judicial taxes and fees and received technical and financial assistance from the State.

7. The working group for the equality and integration of the Gypsies continued its efforts to promote information, education, occupational training, employment and housing initiatives for Gypsies. The make-up of the working group had been recast following Council of Ministers decision No. 18/2000. It would be sending representatives to the National Association of Municipalities and the National Association of Communes, as well as associations working with Gypsy communities.

8. Mr. MARRECAS FERREIRA (Portugal) said that the overview presented in the report regarding Portugal's multicultural and mixed population - which in no way detracted from the sense of belonging to the same national community - and the situation of the Gypsy population - remained unchanged. By contrast, there had been a number of developments in the situation of the Guineans and Kosovars. Initially, Council of Ministers decision No. 44/99 had regulated the temporary protection of persons from Kosovo. The Kosovars had later returned to their country of origin. Regarding the situation of Guinean citizens, he said that of the 5,211 residence permits applied for (para. 7), 2,163 had been granted as of 15 July 1999. The scope of decision No. 94/98 had since been enlarged, and Guinean citizens who had not come from Guinea-Bissau and had already been in Portugal or other European Union member States had been allowed to stay, because they had not been able to return to their country on account of the war there. Council of Ministers decision No. 103/2000 had extended until October 2000 the residence permit of Guinean citizens enjoying temporary protection; the technical and financial support programme under Council of Ministers decision No. 90/99 had also been extended. That decision had provided for the establishment of a working group on Guinean citizens, who, once their temporary protection status had ended, could receive support under the general system for foreign citizens and obtain a residence permit.

9. Some figures needed to be updated. Only 429 persons had returned to Guinea-Bissau, of whom 167 had been evacuated from that country upon the outbreak of the conflict. Regarding the statistics on foreigners (paras. 9-20), he drew attention to the updated figures for 1999 appended to his statement, which had been circulated at the meeting. A recent law on immigration provided for a new procedure to deal with the problem of regularizing immigrants, which came under the responsibility of the Aliens and Frontiers Department, with a special working group set up to that effect (GREI). In an initial stage, 31,117 applications had been received; 29,809 had been judged admissible. During a second stage, 3,020 applications had been judged admissible out of 3,965 originally rejected.

10. He was pleased to announced that his Government had made the declaration under article 14 of the Convention and had accepted the amendments to article 8 (Assembly decision No. 4/2001 and Presidential Decree No. 5/2001).

11. He then referred to Act No. 20/98 on the regulation of the work of foreigners in Portugal, the aim of which was to ensure equal working conditions for foreigners and nationals. It was important to note in that context that Portuguese legislation had abolished limitations on the number of foreigners hired; all employees of a business could henceforth be foreigners and there was no discrimination as to nationality.

12. Regarding legislation on the entry, stay and departure of foreigners, Decree-Law No. 4/2001 amending Decree-Law No. 244/98 contained more flexible procedures for granting

and extending residence permits, established mechanisms for a more effective fight against illegal immigration networks and promoted the integration of immigrants. As to measures to prevent and combat trafficking in immigrants and the exploitation of illegal workers, a new type of offence had been introduced to punish anyone who offered employment to a foreigner illegally in the country (art. 136-A). In connection with the integration of foreign citizens, he referred to the annual report that assessed the labour market, to article 36.2 of the Decree-Law and to the amendments introduced to the principle of family reunification, which henceforth included family members living not only outside Portugal, but also those already in the country (art. 56.2). Under Portuguese legislation, the members of the family of the resident foreigner, including the spouse and dependant children below the age of 21, minors adopted by the couple, their parents if they were dependants and dependant siblings were eligible for a residence permit.

13. Regarding Act No. 134/99 prohibiting discrimination in the exercise of rights on grounds of race, colour, nationality or ethnic origin (paras. 40-44), that legislation had been regulated by Decree-Law No. 111/2000, which gave the Commission for Equality and against Racial Discrimination administrative power to rule in complaints of racial discrimination and impose a fine and punishment.

14. In its observations on the third report of Portugal on implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights had expressed concern about cases of intolerance and discrimination involving Gypsies, refugees and immigrants and the fact that foreign workers could not stand for election in workers' councils or attend vocational training courses to which Portuguese were entitled. He referred in that context to the cooperation agreement between the Labour and Vocational Training Institute and the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, the purpose of which was to decide on principles for legal cooperation and joint initiatives in the area of vocational training, employment and social integration for immigrant citizens and ethnic minorities. Provision had been made for combating the social exclusion of all those groups and setting up machinery for sharing and disseminating information on vocational training, employment and social integration. That illustrated Portugal's commitment to ensuring equality among all groups of society.

15. Mr. YUTZIS (Country Rapporteur) said that it would have been useful to have had the update just provided by Mr. Marrecas Ferreira in advance and in writing so that he could have responded in detail to the major changes reported. The Committee was pleased that Portugal had made the declaration under article 14, had accepted the amendments to article 8 of the Convention and permitted immigrants to be involved in some of the decisions of the Consultative Council for Immigration Questions. It also commended the Portuguese Government for the initiative to put an end to the practice of imposing quotas for the hiring of foreigners.

16. Given the State party's insistence, in paragraph 4 of the report, on the homogeneity of the Portuguese population, it was unclear whether Portugal viewed itself as a multicultural and multiracial country. While it might be true that no distinction was made between races, it was important to know whether different ethnic groups existed in Portugal. The term mestizo (of mixed race) had often been used in Latin American countries in support of dubious claims to homogeneity by those who wished to deny the existence of ethnic groups. Portugal had once

been a major colonial Power and its population, as mentioned in paragraph 47 of the report, had been regularly mixed and crossbred by successive arrivals of new ethnic groups. But that did not justify the failure to recognize any separate ethnic group in modern times apart from the Roma (Gypsies).

17. Referring to paragraph 46 of the report, he noted that the Portuguese Government tended to view acts of racism and xenophobia as exceptional and isolated incidents rather than symptomatic phenomena. But a study carried out by a social psychologist, J. Vala, in December 1997 had concluded that Portugal was no less racist than other European countries and that "subtle racism" was expressed by a tendency to underline cultural differences and to deny the capacity for adaptation of certain ethnic minorities.

18. Stressing the need for accurate data to assess compliance with the Convention, he noted that, according to the report, the figure of 40,000 Portuguese citizens who could be classified as Gypsies was "not very precise". A document concerning employment and the protection of migrant workers published by the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities Affairs stated that Portugal had become an immigration target country and that some 200,000 foreigners were legally resident in Portugal in 2000. How precise was that figure?

19. While the process of regularization of the status of illegal immigrants was highly commendable, he regretted the lack of data in the report on the distribution of foreigners by occupation. Referring to paragraphs 32 to 37 of the report, he asked for further details about the requirement for a special written contract in the case of some foreign workers, while others were exempted. What was the basis for that distinction?

20. Some foreigners were reportedly excluded from professional associations, from enrolling in higher or vocational education courses and from obtaining loans on the same terms as their Portuguese counterparts. In the era of economic globalization, companies sought to maintain their competitiveness by lowering wages, a step that was often easier to take in the case of immigrant workers, especially those whose papers were not in order. It was reported that the very low wages in the hotel business in Portugal attracted only cheap immigrant labour. Similar conditions prevailed in the building and metalworking industries. A positive factor was that the trade unions had sided with the immigrant workers and that the Government was seeking to address the problem. But he wondered how effective their efforts would be if even legally recruited immigrants were being denied opportunities for advancement through further training.

21. According to a case study undertaken by the Portuguese Refugee Council (PRC), entitled Social and Economic Integration of Refugees into the Host Society, refugees experienced an "incomplete legalization process" since they continued to rely on an informal labour market, performing precarious jobs that did not offer security or dignity. Their economic status thus remained permanently insecure. They lacked basic social protection and were denied access to rights and social privileges that determined the sense of belonging to a particular society. That conclusion contradicted Portugal's official stance regarding the existence of discrimination.

22. No information was given in the report on compliance with article 5 of the Convention. The Committee would appreciate data on access by all sectors of the population to health, education and housing.

23. With regard to the Roma (Gypsies), he commended the legal measures described in paragraphs 23 to 27 of the report but noted that some proceedings were still before the courts. The Committee looked forward to hearing about the final outcome of those cases. According to paragraph 25, legal action had been taken against what was described as a "terrorist association". The perpetrators had thus been prosecuted for an offence under ordinary criminal law and not for the offence of racial discrimination within the meaning of article 4 of the Convention. No action seemed to have been taken against the so-called terrorist associations as such. He was curious to know whether they still existed. He cited a recent report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) to the effect that the working group for the equality and integration of Gypsies established by the Portuguese Government in 1996 had submitted a report in January 1997 which recognized a tendency in Portuguese society towards exclusion of and indifference to Gypsies.

24. Lastly, he asked whether the Convention and the Committee's concluding observations on Portugal's fifth to eighth periodic reports (CERD/C/304/Add.67) had been disseminated widely and in how many cases the provisions of the Convention had been invoked in judicial proceedings before the Portuguese courts.

25. Mr. VALENCIA RODRIGUEZ said that Portugal was clearly a racially mixed and multi-ethnic country. Although the Constitution prohibited the compilation of demographic data based on race or ethnic origin, Portugal could follow the example of other countries with similar constitutional provisions which had provided the Committee with data based on socio-economic studies.

26. A large proportion of the sizeable population of foreigners living in Portugal came from member countries of the European Union and Portuguese-speaking countries. He asked for details of the occupations in which they were employed as an indicator of whether distinctions were made in the light of, inter alia, Portugal's obligations as a member of the European Union. Warmly welcoming the steps taken to regularize the status of illegal immigrants, he requested additional information about an initiative that could set an example for other countries with similar problems.

27. He was pleased to hear that Portugal had made the declaration under article 14 of the Convention and had ratified the amendment to article 8 of the Convention.

28. Gypsies constituted a large and disadvantaged minority. What specific action had been taken or was contemplated, in the light of article 2, paragraph 2, of the Convention, to promote their development? Referring to paragraphs 23 to 27, he praised the action by the Prefect of Braga in defence of the rights of the Gypsy community. The penalties imposed reflected the authorities' determination to honour their obligations under the Convention to prevent acts of racial discrimination. The Committee looked forward to hearing about the outcome of the appeals mentioned in paragraph 27.

29. He trusted that racial or ethnic criteria played no part in the implementation of Act No. 15/98 on asylum and refugees, and that all asylum-seekers were treated equally. The

same applied to Act No. 20/98 on work by foreigners, under which employers were free to employ any worker residing legally in Portugal, regardless of nationality. He wished to know more about how the two acts were applied in practice. Paragraph 33 indicated that there were differences in the employment conditions of foreign workers in Portugal based on the principle of reciprocity. However, such a principle could not always be applied, particularly with respect to economic migrants. With reference to paragraph 38, he sought clarification as to how exactly the Portuguese Government intended to strike a balance between good reception conditions for foreigners and its European Union commitments. By according preferential treatment to immigrants from the European Union, Portugal would effectively be discriminating against those from other regions.

30. Act No. 134/99 prohibiting discrimination in the exercise of rights on grounds of race, colour, nationality or ethnic origin was a very important piece of legislation, which complied with virtually all the requirements of article 2, paragraph 1, of the Convention. Particularly worthy of note was article 4, paragraph 2 of the Act, referred to in paragraph 43 of the report. Paragraph 42 of the report listed some of the discriminatory practices covered by the law; he would, however, welcome information on the other discriminatory practices and whether they were liable to punishment.

31. The activities carried out by the Office of the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities and the Bureau of Documentation and Comparative Law of the Office of the Procurator General of the Republic complied with the provisions of article 7 of the Convention. What other steps were taken to disseminate information on the instrument and to promote tolerance, understanding and friendship among different sectors of the population? Welcoming Portugal's efforts to combat racial discrimination, he looked forward to a constructive dialogue with the delegation and recommended that the report and the Committee's concluding observations be widely publicized in the State party.

32. Mr. ABOUL-NASR, referring to paragraph 3 of the report, asked what exactly was meant by the statement that the Gypsy population was the only group which could be distinguished from the Portuguese population as a whole. Unlike other Committee members, he did not attach great importance to the provision of statistics, which might be contrary to State policy and involve considerable expense. The information contained in the report was satisfactory for his purposes. However, why did paragraph 6 of the report refer exclusively to refugees from Guinea-Bissau and Kosovo? Surely there must be refugees from other countries too? According to paragraph 7, 201 Guineans had returned to their own country. Had they returned of their own free will?

33. He would also welcome comments on the very serious problem of the arrival on Portuguese shores of illegal immigrants from North Africa in appalling conditions, generally on their way to other destinations in Europe. A comprehensive humanitarian approach was required to deal with such a situation.

34. He understood that sentences had been handed down for those responsible for the events in Vila Verde described in paragraphs 23 to 27 of the report, but wished to know whether any compensation had been awarded to the victims. In his view a public apology would not suffice. What accommodation had been found for the Gypsies who had been evicted and seen their homes destroyed?

35. The section of the report on work by foreigners (paras. 32 et seq.) implied that there was a differentiation in treatment between foreign workers from different countries, which was not acceptable under the provisions of the Convention. He would welcome more information in that regard. According to paragraph 45 of the report Portugal was trying to combat racial discrimination with every means at its disposal. He hoped that meant every legal and peaceful means and not the use of force.

36. Mr. DIACONU said that Act No. 134/99, detailed in paragraphs 40-44 of the report, was undoubtedly one of the most comprehensive pieces of legislation on racial discrimination he had ever encountered in a State party report. Its definition of racial discrimination was fully in line with that of the Convention. Discriminatory practices listed in paragraph 42 with respect to education, employment and public facilities were well covered. He also welcomed the important distinction drawn between natural and legal persons. Nonetheless, what different types of penalties were imposed under the law for the various discriminatory practices listed?

37. No information had been furnished on the socio-economic status of the Roma (Gypsy) population. He would like to know more about their level of education, participation in society and politics and rate of unemployment. Regarding the events that had occurred at Vila Verde, he asked what sanctions had been taken against the mayor who had ordered the demolition of the Gypsy dwellings. Elsewhere such action had sometimes been deemed necessary and lawful in the interests of public health or where the housing had been built on public property. However in the case in point it appeared that the demolition had indeed been unlawful and the person responsible should consequently be punished. What had happened was significant since it demonstrated to what extent the general public was ready to tolerate the Gypsy population. It also pointed to the need for specific social and economic programmes for that community and for awareness-raising among the general public to ensure that such situations did not recur.

38. He shared Mr. Aboul-Nasr's concern about the differentiation in the treatment of foreign workers, referred to in paragraph 33. All foreign workers should be treated on an equal footing and Portugal's current procedures must be reviewed as they were not in conformity with the Convention.

39. Mr. LECHUGA HEVIA, noting that members of the vigilante groups involved in the Vila Verde incident had been given prison sentences, asked whether the mayor of the town, responsible for the arbitrary and racist act of demolishing the Gypsy dwellings, was exempt from punishment on account of his status.

40. Referring to recent developments in legislation relating to foreign workers, he expressed concern about the possibility of employers nonetheless giving preference to European Union workers over those from other regions and inquired whether the situation could be monitored.

41. Mr. THORNBERRY said there were several references in the report to the homogeneity of the Portuguese population - a notion that was somewhat out of date and moreover not in line with the Committee's General Recommendation VIII concerning the interpretation and application of article 1, paragraphs 1 and 4 of the Convention, according to which membership of a particular racial or ethnic group was based upon self-identification, unless no justification existed to the contrary. Did the State party's claim of homogeneity reflect the real situation? Was there no evidence of group solidarity other than among the Portuguese? In view of the process of globalization, Portugal, like other countries, must have many new minority groups.

42. Referring to the Committee's General Recommendation XXVII on Discrimination against Roma, he wondered whether "Gypsies" was really the name the group wished to be known by. He also sought more information on their situation and possible segregation. Why and in what way were such people distinguished from the rest of the Portuguese population?

43. Mr. TANG Chengyuan asked for more information about legislation relating to refugees and in particular the children of refugees born in Portugal. Would they, for example, be eligible for Portuguese nationality?

44. The principle of reciprocity in the treatment of foreign workers referred to in paragraph 33 of the report was difficult to uphold. Agreements between States parties on such matters certainly existed, but were applicable only to citizens sent by their Governments to work in other countries and not to the type of foreign workers found in Portugal, including migrant workers and political refugees. He would therefore welcome some clarification of the matter in general and the phrase "equality of treatment" in particular.

45. Mr. BOSSUYT asked what criteria had had to be met by illegal immigrants to regularize their situation during the ad hoc regularization proclaimed in 1996 under Decree-Law No. 150/96. Apparently 85 per cent of applicants had been successful; but what had become of the remaining 15 per cent? Had they been ordered to leave the country, or had they remained illegally? As of 1996 had the situation with regard to illegal immigration changed at all?

46. The definition of asylum-seekers and refugees contained in Act No. 15/98 of 26 March was considerably broader than that of the Convention on the Status of Refugees. He nonetheless expressed concern about the procedures relating to the granting of asylum under that law, outlined in paragraph 30 of the report, which seemed to be rather cumbersome. Perhaps they should be reviewed.

47. He was pleased to note that the quota requirement in employment had been abolished and that steps were being taken to prevent the exploitation of foreign workers. What exactly was the status of the Office of the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities and the National Refugee Commission? Were they independent from the Government and, if not, to which ministries were they accountable?

48. The delegation of Portugal withdrew.

THIRD DECADE TO COMBAT RACISM AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION; THIRD WORLD CONFERENCE AGAINST RACISM, RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, XENOPHOBIA AND RELATED INTOLERANCE (agenda item 11) (continued)

49. The CHAIRMAN called on Mr. Pillai to report on the outcome of the Asia-Pacific Seminar of Experts in Preparation for the World Conference against Racism: Migrants and Trafficking in Persons with Particular Reference to Women and Children, held in Bangkok from 5 to 7 September 2000, at which he had represented the Committee.

50. Mr. PILLAI said that the seminar had been well attended by States parties, United Nations experts, national human rights commissions in the region and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). During the general discussion, reference had been made to the significant diversity among countries in respect of human rights and socio-economic conditions, and the very wide disparities in per capita incomes, all of which contributed largely to the problems of migration and trafficking and respect for human rights in the Asia-Pacific region, home to a large proportion of the world's poor and illiterate. There had been a great deal of intraregional migration, mainly from the poorer to the richer countries, caused in large measure by political turmoil and poverty. Trafficking was encouraged by the lack of avenues of legal migration and by the operation of internal crime syndicates.

51. Many regional organizations had been represented, including the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which focused on economic and political issues, although in 1997 SAARC had introduced a resolution on trafficking, which was yet to see the light of day. Participants felt that regional associations should play a more important role in human rights issues in general. The conclusions and recommendations adopted by the seminar highlighted the fact that trafficking and migration were closely linked to ethnic issues, such as discriminatory immigration practices and racist and sexist ideologies.

52. Those countries of the region that had still not ratified the Convention had been urged to do so. The participants had also felt that domestic legislation alone did not suffice and that equally important were attitudinal changes - especially in countries comprising very diverse population groups - in which civil society organizations had an important role to play, as did the national and regional human rights institutions. Indeed, the national institutions had organized themselves into a regional association which was addressing issues such as migration and trafficking.

53. With regard to migration, participants had emphasized the need to ratify the 1990 International Convention for the Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Migration had a large human rights dimension and should be more actively addressed by human rights bodies. Labour-receiving countries should adopt labour legislation in keeping with minimum international labour standards, while labour-sending countries should set up programmes to alert prospective migrants to the pitfalls awaiting them if they opted for illegal migration or trafficking. Where trafficking was concerned, the main areas

covered by the seminar had been safe rescue, the return and reintegration of victims of trafficking, and anti-trafficking measures. States had been invited to organize training for law and order officials. The recommendations of the seminar were reflected in the Draft Plan of Action that had emerged from the Asian Regional Preparatory Conference held in Tehran. He had himself delivered a paper on migration and trafficking at the seminar.

54. The CHAIRMAN invited Mr. Fall to report on the Regional Seminar of Experts on the Prevention of Ethnic and Racial Conflicts in Africa, held in Addis Ababa from 4 to 6 October 2000 at which he had represented the Committee.

55. Mr. FALL said that, since Africa was the scene of so many conflicts originating in ethnic disputes, the seminar organizers had chosen ethnic conflict as the sole theme. Politicians often used ethnic data to exacerbate differences among the various groups, causing ethnic conflicts to proliferate on the continent. His own theme had been the efficacy of international standards and mechanisms in ethnic-conflict prevention, enabling him to explain the content of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and its role in combating racism. A variety of topics had been raised by other representatives, especially from African human rights and anti-racial discrimination associations. The Declaration that had emanated from the seminar had been used in the preparation of the plan of action of the African Regional Preparatory Conference, held in Dakar. It called on all African States that had not done so to accede to or ratify the Convention and to incorporate it into their domestic legislation. The Final Act had been dispatched to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. At the Dakar Regional Conference, the Minority Rights Group (MRG) had organized a seminar for NGOs, at which he had spoken on Convention-related issues, which had given rise to an open-ended discussion. He had also briefed African NGOs on other topics relating to article 14 of the Convention.

56. The CHAIRMAN, thanking Mr. Pillai and Mr. Fall for their work, commended the statement made by the latter on the Committee's behalf to the inter-sessional open-ended working group currently in session. It was important for contacts, spearheaded by the contact group for the World Conference, to be made with participants in the working group as soon as possible so that the contact group could finalize its proposals to the Committee, incorporating any further proposals by other members, by the end of that week

57. Ms. McDOUGALL suggested that the secretariat might be asked to draft a letter on behalf of the Committee, to be dispatched at the earliest opportunity to the regional groups, informing them that it would be helpful to meet with them during the current session.

58. Mr. BOSSUYT said it was preferable to hold confidential talks rather than official meetings with the chairpersons of the five regional groups.

59. Ms. McDOUGALL, supporting that suggestion, suggested that the Chairman of the Committee and a few other members might engage in such talks with the regional group representatives.

60. The CHAIRMAN said he would ask the secretariat to inform the regional group chairmen that the Committee wished to meet them privately to discuss certain proposals that the Committee wished to make for inclusion in the Final Declaration. At that meeting, however, the Committee must already have specific proposals prepared. The letter might also include the document containing the Committee's contribution in its current state (A/CONF.189/PC.1/12), as a basis for further elaboration of certain topics and issues with the regional groups.

61. It was so agreed.

The meeting rose at 5.30 p.m.